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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000856

SIPDIS

EUR/CARC AND DRL FOR WENDY SILVERMAN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#) [RS](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: MAJOR OPPOSITION PARTIES SIGN JOINT BOYCOTT
STATEMENT

REF: BAKU 763

Classified By: Political and Economic Counselor Robert Garverick for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On September 5 the heads of the five largest opposition parties signed a public statement boycotting the October 15 presidential election. This represents a step forward in organization for the normally fractured opposition. Discussions with opposition party leadership reveal, however, that there continues to be disagreement about plans for further cooperation, and no broad coalition movement seems to be afoot. While there is a desire to hold united pre- or post-election rallies, the details of these events are still being negotiated and it remains unclear the extent to which the GOAJ would allow such events to happen. Opposition leaders report that currently they worry more about foreign policy than domestic policy due to a general stagnation of the domestic political process and the recent events in Georgia. END SUMMARY

JOINT OPPOSITION STATEMENT ON BOYCOTT

¶2. (C) On September 5 the heads of the five largest opposition parties signed a joint statement announcing their boycott of the October 15 presidential election. This includes the Liberal Party (Lala Shovket), the Public Forum for Azerbaijan (Eldar Namazov), the Popular Front Party (Ali Kerimli), the Musavat Party (Isa Gambar), and the Citizen and Development Party (Ali Aliyev). All five parties had previously announced separately that they would not participate in the election (see ref). This statement, however, represents the first public attempt at a coordinated position by the most well-known members of the opposition in advance of this election.

¶3. (C) The statement is a short, one and half page explanation of why the opposition believes the pre-election environment does not allow for the holding of a free and fair election. The complaints include: the pro-government structure of the election commissions; the eviction of political parties from their offices; the lack of freedom of assembly; the limits on media freedom; the continued holding of political prisoners; and the lack of an independent judicial system or parliament. The last sentence of the statement asserts that the opposition will not consider any government elected through this process as legitimate.

COOPERATION BETWEEN PARTIES NOT AS STRONG AS IT APPEARS

14. (C) Through subsequent discussions with Fuad Mustafayev, deputy head of the Popular Front Party, and Sulhaddin Akbar, deputy head of Musavat, it is clear that there is little agreement among the five parties about their next steps after the joint statement. Mustafayev stated that the five parties have agreed to have united positions on election related issues, and to maintain closer cooperation after the election. Mustafayev claimed that the five parties want to hold large demonstrations in advance of the election to explain to the public why the parties are not participating in the election. These rallies would also be useful, Mustafayev reported, in assessing the support within the public for the opposition. In addition to these rallies, Mustafayev said the opposition is planning to reach out to the public through the electronic media, although not through the internet as their lack of office space makes it hard for the party to regularly maintain its website.

15. (C) Akbar, however, reported that Musavat does not want to deepen relations with the other parties at this point. They may join the other parties for some statements or events, but are cautious about collaboration given the problems of the past. While Akbar stated he would like to hold town hall style meetings in Baku and in the regions, he believed that the GOAJ would not allow the opposition to hold any rallies at all. Musavat's main election activity will be a large election monitoring mission to observe voter turnout at over 100 polling stations. Akbar believes that much of the fraud in this election will come from inflated voter turnout figures, as the population in general is apathetic toward the election but President Ilham Aliyev will not

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accept a low turnout figure. Akbar stated that this election monitoring mission will be open for other parties to join, but that Musavat had enough resources to complete it on its own if no agreement with the others was reached.

STAGNATION OF DOMESTIC POLITICS AND FOCUS ON FOREIGN POLICY

16. (C) Both Mustafayev and Akbar reported a stagnation of the domestic political process in Azerbaijan. Akbar further explained that he believes the lack of any tangible results after the protests of the 2003 and 2005 elections has caused people to withdraw from domestic politics. This makes it hard for opposition parties to gather support, especially financially. He described opposition parties as operating in "worried expectation mode," meaning they continue to function but are constantly worried and expecting trouble. Akbar further explained that among the political intellectuals in Azerbaijan, the focus of discussion now, given the recent events in the region, is foreign policy, not domestic politics. Akbar leads a club of politic professors and he reports that they are worried that the recent events in Georgia will cause the GOAJ to slow its process of westward integration or alternatively that Russia will increase its interference in Azerbaijan.

COMMENT

17. (C) The signing of a united, succinct statement of protest is a major step forward in political organization for Azerbaijan's opposition forces. Any united attempt to hold peaceful rallies in accordance with Azerbaijan's new law of assembly would also be an excellent test of the GOAJ's progress on freedom of assembly. It is unlikely at this point, however, that any rally would draw large numbers of people. The opposition's descriptions of the stagnation of domestic politics is consistent with what we are hearing more generally, as is the continued fear of Russian interference after the events in Georgia. Human rights activists and some opposition media, in the wake of the Russia-Georgia conflict, have noticeably stepped back criticism of President Aliyev; some activists have even gone so far as to endorse the

President for re-election. How this will play out in contrast to the opposition parties' statement of protest -- and how it might have an impact on pre- or post-election rallies -- has yet to be determined.

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